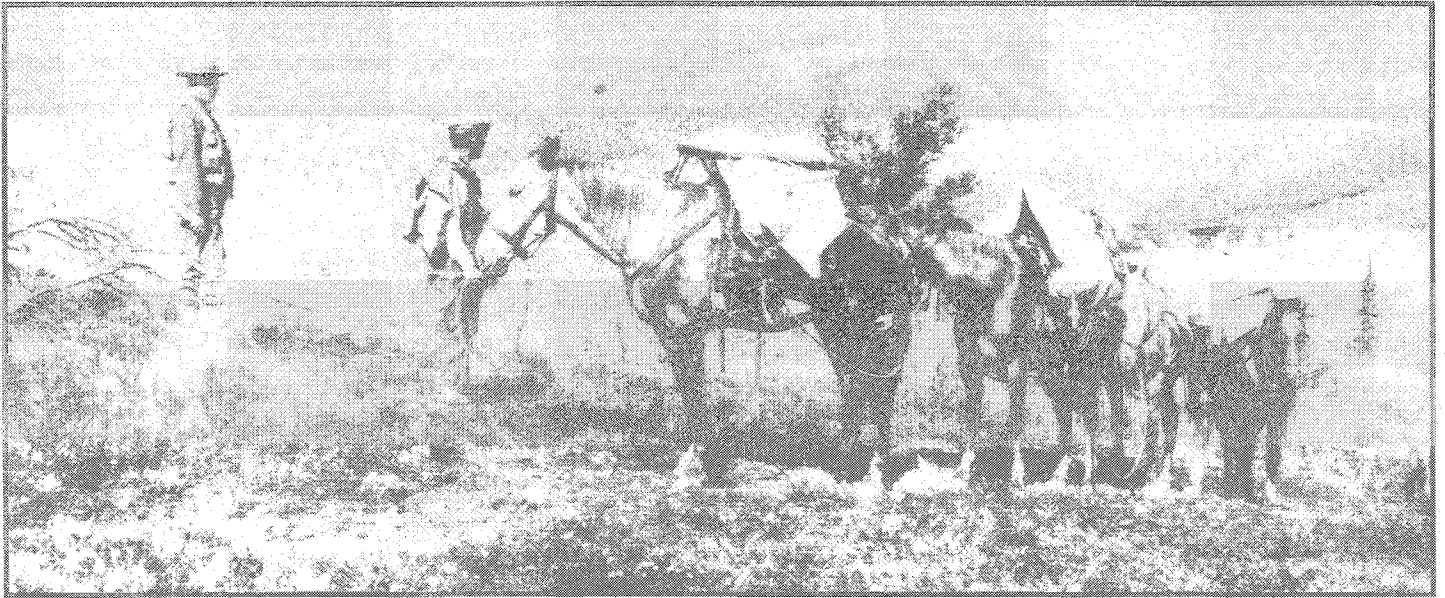


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# The Eagle-Valdez Trail

## Northern Portion



A BLM 'Adventures in the Past' Series

Produced by the  
Bureau of Land Management

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in cooperation with the  
Eagle Historical Society

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and the  
Alaska Department of Transportation  
and Public Facilities

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# The Eagle-Valdez Trail

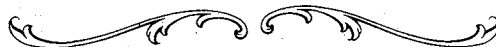


cover photo: U.S. Army pack train  
exploring the Fortymile region.

(Photo courtesy of the National  
Archives)

*When Alaska was purchased by the United States from Russia in 1867, it was an uncharted territory that was considered to be a wilderness of little value. The U. S. Army, charged with its protection, needed to learn whether the Interior Indians were peaceful or warlike, and what the country they inhabited was like, in case of an Indian war. The Army sent three expeditions into the Interior between 1883 and 1885 to answer those concerns. Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka traveled the Yukon River, Lieutenant W. R. Abercrombie investigated the Copper River, and Lieutenant Henry T. Allen rode overland from the Copper River to the Tanana River.*

*The exploration parties found the Indians to be peaceful and inquisitive. The soldiers gained information about travel routes, many of which were used by the local Indians. They also discovered the route that later became the Eagle-Valdez Trail.*



## Want to know more? Just ask us!

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## A BLM 'Adventures in the Past' Series

## Trail to Gold Country

*"A forty mile walk over a rough wintry trail, in forty below zero weather, with a forty-pound pack of grub and blankets on his back, left the prospector without poetry in his soul, but with a keen appreciation of the distance traveled . . ."*

—Judge James Wickersham, Eagle 1899

**Gold!** This cry led many hardy souls to challenge the unforgiving elements of the north country for their fortunes. Precious gold drew hopeful prospectors to the Fortymile River region of Interior Alaska. Conflicts during the major gold rushes in the Fortymile River area in 1886 and in Canada's Klondike River area in 1896 created a need for law enforcement. The U.S. government sent army personnel to the Eagle area on the Yukon River to keep the peace.

After investigating reports of miners threatened by starvation and lawlessness on the Yukon River in 1897, Captain P. H. Ray recommended that several military forts be built along the river, and a military trail be built from Port Valdez to the Interior for the benefit of the prospectors. Several army parties were sent to Alaska to continue explorations and determine the best route to the Interior.

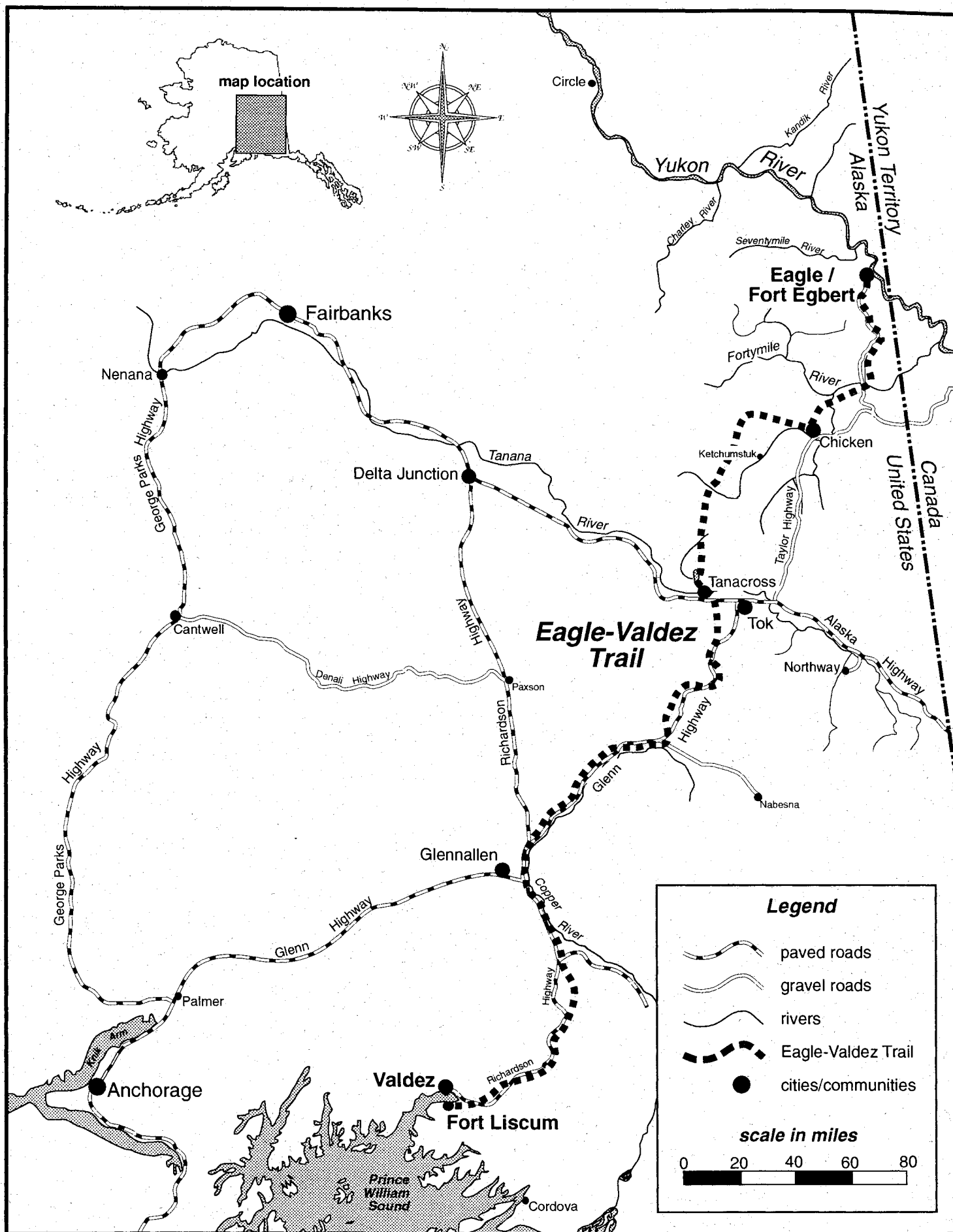


(Photo courtesy of the Bryant Collection, Eagle Historical Society)

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*"I am fully satisfied that in the near future Alaska will be the source of great wealth, but the development will necessarily be slow owing to the climatic conditions. . . . To promote this I recommend that several well-equipped parties be put in the field and a thorough geographical and geological exploration of the country be made, so that men of ordinary means will be able to engage in the work of prospecting and mining."*

—Captain P. H. Ray , 1898



In 1899, orders were received by the military to build a road from Valdez to Eagle City that would serve the public. Starting at Valdez on April 21, Captain Abercrombie began surveying and marking the route, and determining the most practical crossings of the Copper and Tanana rivers. By summer's end, 93 miles of good wagon road, five to 10 feet wide, had been built through Keystone Canyon; another 114 miles to the Copper River were cleared, and streams bridged.

At the same time, Lieutenant Richardson and a detachment of 25 men started construction of Fort Egbert at Eagle City. Once housing for the men and animals was completed in 1900, the soldiers began clearing the road toward Valdez.

Using sleds, pack horses and mules, soldiers transported materials and food for hundreds of miles, slowly learning and marking the unknown. Weather along the undeveloped route was harsh, and they suffered through snow, rain and heat. Temperatures ranged from 90°F in the summer to minus 70°F in the winter. Smoke fires were built to relieve the men and animals from the swarms of mosquitoes. Caribou and bears were hunted and eaten when rations ran out.



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*"The mosquitoes are the midsummer bane of Alaska. Keen-sighted, nimble and daring, they make disagreeable antagonists by day and by night, wasting no time in sleep prior to the great tribal funeral in the fall."*

*—E. Hazard Wells, journalist, 1891*

(Photo courtesy of Glenbow Archives, NC1-1214, Calgary, Alberta)

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### Just how cold was it?

The freezing points of several items were used by early trader Leroy McQuesten to gauge the cold in Interior Alaska:

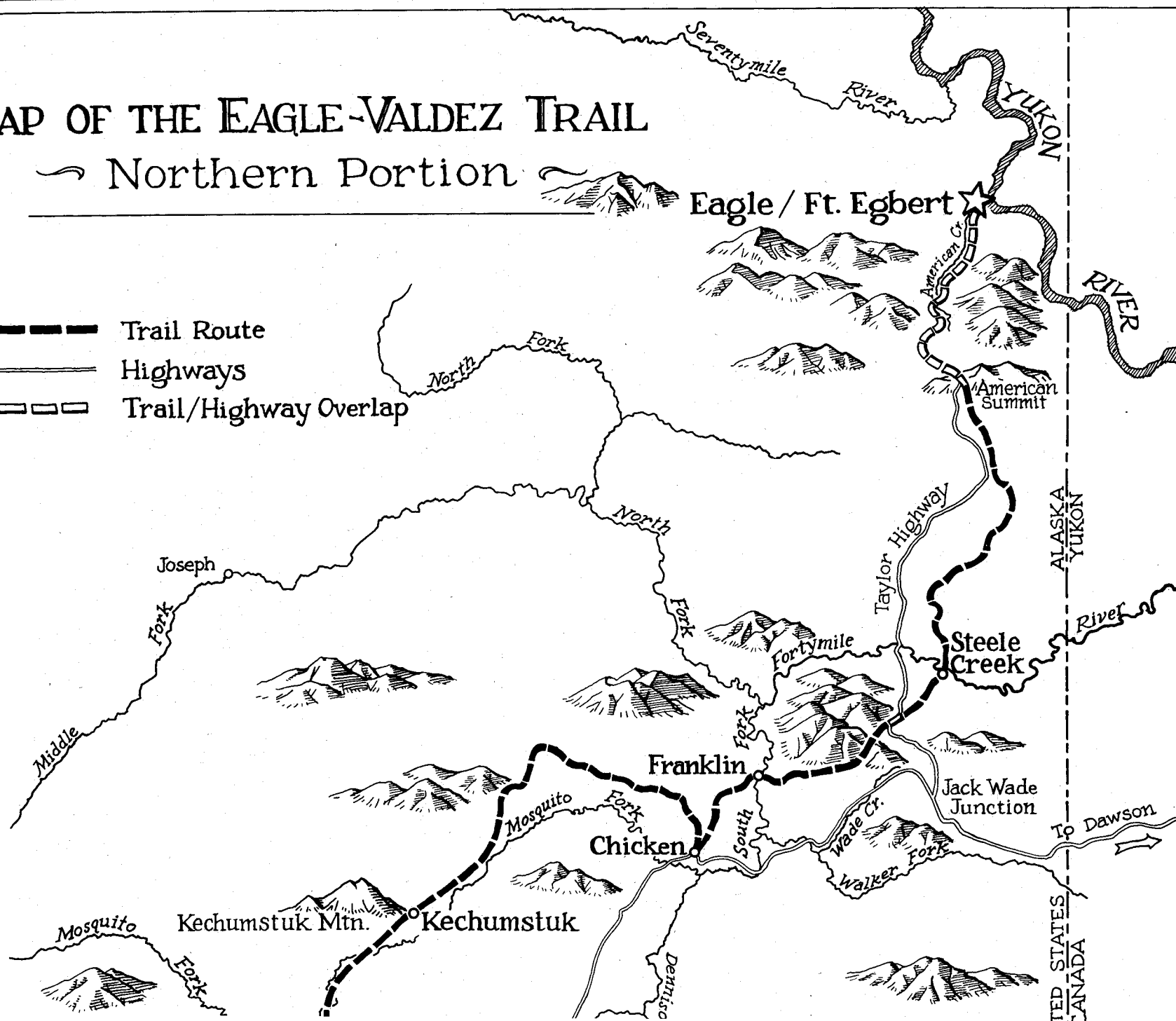
quicksilver (mercury) froze at minus 40°F  
coal oil froze at minus 50°F  
Jamaica ginger froze at minus 60°F  
Perry Davis' painkiller froze at minus 75°F  
St. Jacob's oil never froze!

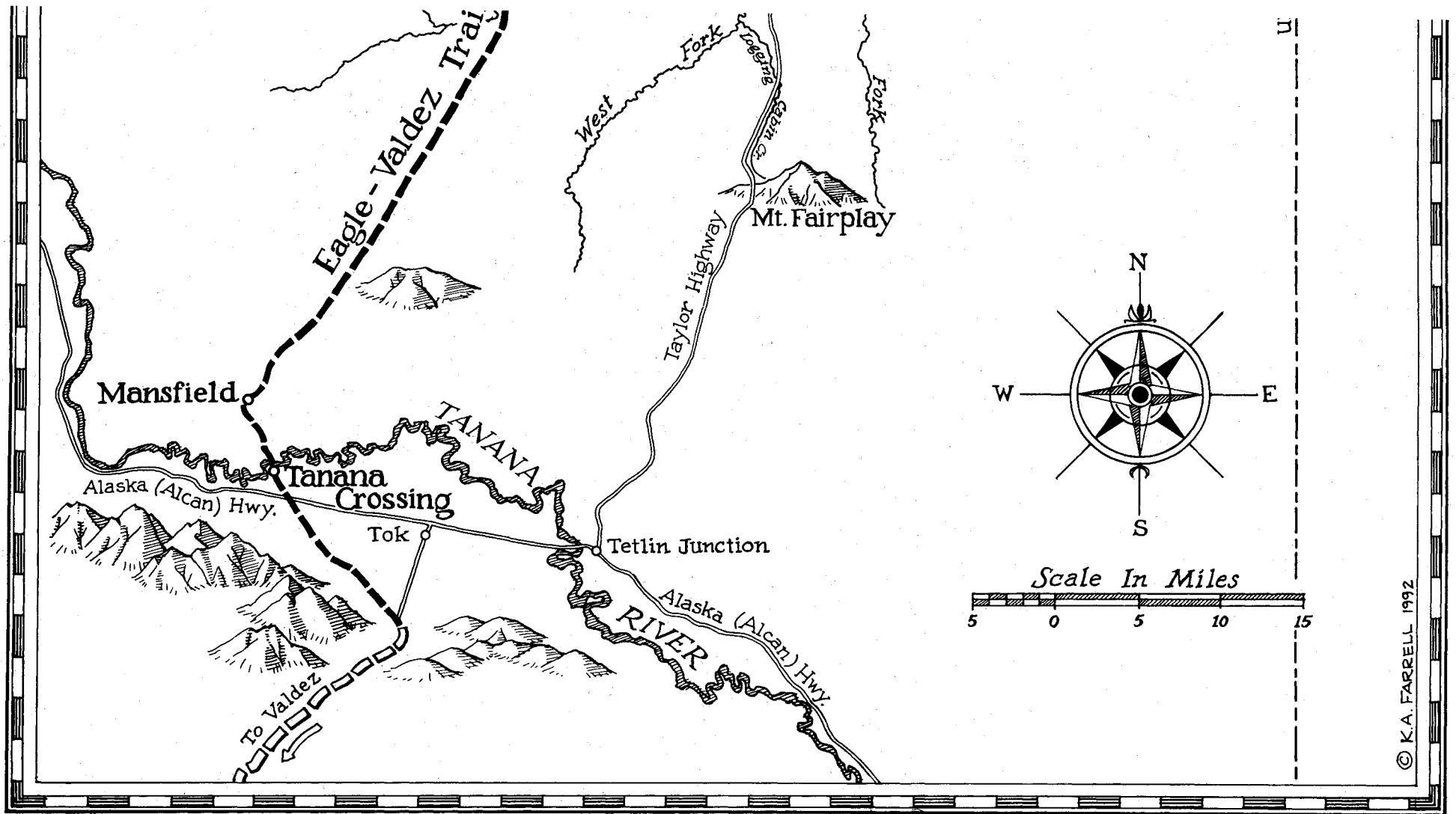
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# MAP OF THE EAGLE-VALDEZ TRAIL

## Northern Portion

- Trail Route
- Highways
- Trail/Highway Overlap





The above map shows the relationship between the northern portion of the Eagle-Valdez Trail and today's highways. Look for locations where the trail and the road follow the same route. Where you now travel by automobile, earlier travelers once passed on foot, by dog team, or horse-drawn wagon.

## The 'All-American' Route

Topographer C. E. Griffiths and his party, including 17 packhorses, left Knik Station for Eagle City in June 1899. They traveled the Susitna, Delta, Chistochina, Gakona, Slana, Tok and Tanana rivers. They then followed the Indian trail past the villages of Mansfield and Ketchumstuk, to Franklin Gulch on the Fortymile River. From there they traveled the miners' trail to Eagle City. Griffiths thought this was the most practical route from the Gulf of Alaska to the Yukon River since it avoided all glaciers, mountain ranges and crossings of the Copper River, and could be made in 20 to 25 days with pack horses.



A pack train crossing the  
Fortymile River.

(Photo courtesy of USGS Collection,  
Eagle Historical Society)

The first recorded round trip from Valdez to Eagle City was in 1899, by Quartermaster's Clerk John F. Rice. He left Valdez June 16 with packers, five pack horses, two saddle horses, a cook and hunter, and rations for 35 days. Included in his party was Post Office Inspector C. L. Wayland, who planned to establish post offices at mining camps enroute.

Their Athabascan Indian guide led them to Ketchumstuk Village, arriving there July 18, after crossing the Tanana River by raft. From Ketchumstuk they pioneered their own trail to Eagle.

Passing several mining areas and many prospectors, Rice's party reached Eagle City July 28, after traveling a total of 425 miles. They left Eagle August 9 and returned to Valdez over the same route, arriving September 11. They reported that the route they traveled presented no major obstacles and could be transformed into a wagon road or a railroad bed. This 'All-American' route was 200 miles shorter than the White Pass or Chilkoot routes in Canada, did not require a long boat trip, and was fully within the United States.



## Building WAMCATS

Alaska's first telegraph line to the Lower 48 ran from Fort Egbert to Dawson City in the Yukon Territory, which was connected to Whitehorse, Canada. From Whitehorse, messages were carried overland to Skagway, and shipped by boat to Seattle, where they were telegraphed to their final destination. The process often took months.

The U.S. government wanted an 'All-American' communication system to guarantee prompt transmission of messages, and to avoid dependence on a foreign country. The Army was ordered to begin construction of the Washington-Alaska Military Cable And Telegraph System (WAMCATS) in 1900, which followed much of the Eagle-Valdez Trail.

Fort Egbert soldiers built and maintained the telegraph line between Eagle and Valdez. Cabins were built every 40 miles along the line to house the repairmen. Emergency shelter cabins were located in between.



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After completion of the WAMCATS line, Lieutenant Mitchell wrote,

*"Alaska was now open to civilization. No longer was it the land of the unknown, sealed tight by the God of everlasting snow and frost."*

(Photo courtesy of National Archives)

The Army Signal Corps completed the Eagle-Valdez line of WAMCATS August 24, 1902. Lieutenant Billy Mitchell and Captain George Burnell met at Tanana Crossing (now Tanacross) and linked Fort Egbert and Fort Liscum, near Valdez. Cable lines were laid from Seattle to Valdez in 1904, linking Fort Egbert and the Fortymile gold country to the rest of the world.

The Eagle-Valdez Trail was traveled extensively until the wireless replaced the telegraph in 1909. After that, the trail was used primarily by miners and trappers.

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## Opening up the Country

The Eagle-Valdez Trail was used regularly, although there were frequent complaints about its poor condition. Soldiers continued working on it from 1899 to 1901. Isaac Jones made an agricultural reconnaissance trip into the Interior on the trail in 1901. He traveled with Oscar Fish, the mail contractor, and one of his carriers, Al Patton. Mail was carried twice a month over the trail by pack horses and dog teams. One December, the mailman arrived in Eagle two weeks late. He had lost all of his horses and had to walk in; his mail pouch held one letter.



During a very cold spell, Lieutenant Billy Mitchell drove his dog team down the trail beyond Tanacross to meet the mail carrier. When he found him, the mail carrier was sitting on his sled, frozen solid, even though he had wood gathered in front of him for a fire and a match in his hand.

(Photo courtesy of the Stout Collection, Eagle Historical Society)



Prospectors were also putting the Eagle-Valdez trail to good use. Bob Steel was not yet 18 when he and his brother arrived in Valdez in 1897. Traveling winters and prospecting summers, it took them two years to reach the Fortymile River gold fields. After two more years, Bob moved to Eagle where he became a permanent resident and a major figure in the development of Eagle City.



Prospectors traveling the trail by dog team.

(Photo courtesy of the Charles Bunnell Collection, 58-1026-1677N, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks)



Arthur Froelich, a German immigrant, mined on the Seventymile River in the summer of 1904. He returned to the Lower 48 that winter to visit two nephews, and returned to Alaska March 12, 1905, docking at Valdez . From there he walked the entire length of the trail to Eagle with a dog, a sled and 150 pounds of gear. He traveled from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, often spending the night in a tent. Froelich followed the trail through Copper Center, Gakona, Chistochina, Tanana Crossing and along the Fortymile River. The trip took him three weeks.

The most heavily used portion of the trail was between the Fortymile District and Eagle. There was a lot of mining activity on the Fortymile, and the miners received most of their supplies from Eagle. John Powers established a trading post at Chicken in 1905, and made trips from his Eagle headquarters to Chicken three times a month. Powers used horses to pull wagons in the summer and sleds in the winter.



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For nearly 30 years John Powers delivered mail by horse team between Eagle and Chicken, with the reputation of never being more than one day late. He is seen here freighting mail and goods over American Summit.

(Photo courtesy of Kershaw Collection, Eagle Historical Society)

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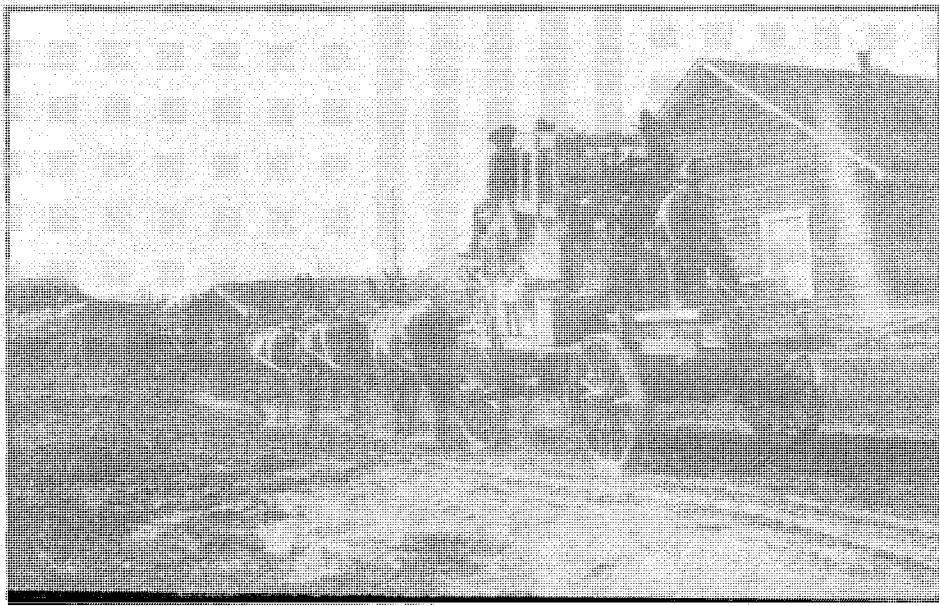
## Railroad Dream

From the beginning of the Eagle-Valdez Trail construction, there were plans to build a railroad along the same route. This 'All-American Route to the Klondike Gold Field' was surveyed in 1899, and construction planned. Several congressmen visited Alaska and recommended that the railroad be built, but money was never appropriated. The dream of a railroad never got beyond the planning stage.

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After the major gold strike in the lower Tanana Valley in 1902, attention turned toward Fairbanks. In 1903, road work began on the Richardson Highway between Valdez and Fairbanks. The new road departed from the Eagle-Valdez Trail at Gakona, turning north. Travelers lost interest in using the Eagle-Valdez Trail, and construction and repair work slowed between Gakona and Eagle.

In 1904, a road tax was levied that required every able-bodied male resident to work two days each year on public roads or pay \$8. Considerable work was accomplished on local projects under that law, but there was never much coordination between the projects.



Mules and freight wagon coming into Eagle on the Eagle-Valdez Trail.

(Photo courtesy of the Henderson Collection, Eagle Historical Society)

The Alaska Road Commission, established in 1905, continued regular improvements between Chicken and Eagle. By the 1920s, the road from Eagle to American Summit was improved enough for automobile use.

Once the Alcan Highway (now known as the Alaska Highway) was completed in 1942, work continued on its side roads. With the completion of the Glenn Highway, Taylor Highway and Richardson Highway, Eagle and Valdez were once again connected in 1953.

Much of today's highway system follows the old Eagle-Valdez Trail, making an interesting historic trip for travelers. Some of the communities and landmarks between Eagle and Valdez, such as Glennallen and the Richardson Highway, were named for the people involved in the establishment of the Eagle-Valdez Trail.